The Role of the Suicide Terrorist in Information Operations

By Dr. Frank L. Goldstein, Dr. Frank E. Emmett, & Dr. Russell J. Stambaugh

Editorial Abstract: Drs. Goldstein and Emmett have produced psychological perspectives on select countries for the Joint Information Operations Center. They now have turned their attention, along with Dr. Stambaugh, to the unique psychological aspects of the terrorist suicide-bomber and his/her ongoing relationship to ongoing information operations. They offer us a "quick look" at a topic that will soon represent a major academic effort on their part.

After a terrorist event, particularly after a suicide-related event, rational men and women attempt to explain or make sense of the motives, concerns, and justifications of the suicide-bomber(s). In this article we argue that while it is a natural and very human temptation to seek those explanations, regrettably, this tendency has been oversimplified, and in many cases, the result has been to simplistically view the suicide-bomber(s) as the product of social forces, a special type of hostility, a societal symptom, or the natural response to frustrations and a lack of gratification in the life of the suicide-bomber.

It is the intent of this article both to review the traditional theories of suicide, and to discuss their relevance to suicide bombing. Suicide-bombing could be understood through the perspective of Emile Durkheim[1] who viewed suicide as the product of social forces, principally disturbances in the individual's "social integration" and "moral regulation"; or Harry Stack Sullivan's[2] perspective that suicide is an intensely aggressive behavior, and that it must constitute a special type of hostility in that the bomber is willing to destroy him/herself as an integral part of the attack upon the objects of his/her hatred; or Edwin Shneidman's theories,[3] who along with Henry Murray[4] postulated that suicide is the end product of an intense psychological pain that stems from thwarted psychological needs that combine with lethality. All

Staged tribute to suicide-bombers. (Associated Press)

of these hypotheses may be a part of the recognition that terrorists, in the general sense, and suicide-bombers, in the specific, represent not one but many psychological profiles, and that perhaps the most consistent profile of the suicide-bomber could be used as part of specific information operations (IO) campaigns.

Suicide-bomber operations have been successful as integrated pieces of insurgent IO campaigns across cultural environments. The suicide action, while local by definition, almost always has regional and global consequences. The suicide-bomber and his support system have today achieved what General James Cartwright calls "the realization of a comprehensive set of global mission capabilities, soundly integrated to achieve more effective and efficient execution."[5] General Cartwright was referring to USSTRATCOM IO support to US combatant commanders, but

his words are just as applicable to suicide-bomber IO justifications and executions.

Creating the Bomber

Joiner's theory[6] synthesizes many of the virtues of previous theories of suicide. He begins from a position of considerable respect for the power of the instinct for self-preservation. He claims that no matter what an individual's emotional pain may be, suicide cannot occur unless the powerful forces of self-preservation can be overcome. Only in extremely rare instances does Joiner believe this can be accomplished quickly. For example, although we learned of the Jonestown mass suicide in the news as if it was a sudden, unexpected event, the Reverend Jones had administered a number of religious 'tests' to his cultists that involved drinking purportedly poisoned Kool-Aid many times before the day of the actual poisoning. For

Joiner, lethal behavior is acquired, generally through the gradual build up of an individual's capacity to numb certain kinds of pain and overcome fear of death. For Joiner, individuals are motivated by feelings relating to personal burdensomeness, and thwarted connectedness, but they make suicide attempts by progressively acquiring lethality. He cites Kamikaze pilots' indoctrination with the concept that they were advancing Japanese society with their deaths, and notes that their suicides were framed as balm for any social humiliation they suffered at Japan's military defeats. This theory lends itself well to the historical evidence we have about other suicide operations, and about military training generally. The capacity to stand in the face of enemy fire and perform effectively requires training. The terrorist's ability to overcome fear of death and to deliberately pursue self-destruction requires a special kind of training that has much in common with traditional military training ideology

Many of the writers concerned about the profiling of suicide bombers, for example, Atran [7] and Altran, [8] stress the bombings as predominantly rational, strategically purposive behavior. Surely this is the case for terrorist network operatives that recruit, arm, train, and select the targets for suicide bombers. Mostly these managerial operatives do not allocate themselves in attacks, and their motivations, skills, and techniques in maintaining terrorist operations strongly resemble those of professionally trained military and intelligence officers in conventional military organizations. They face many of the same risks, and do so in many of the same ways as do their conventional military counterparts.

This observation does not necessarily apply to suicide bombers themselves. Recruits must overcome the same self-preservative forces that other suicides do. Just as trauma, poorly managed affect, problems of social connectedness, and feelings of social obligation can motivate suicides, the religious and ideological systems alluded to by the analysts provide semiotic support and meaning that sustains lethality. They frame issues of

Creating the bomber? (Reuters)

revenge, hopelessness, political disparity and social isolation in terms that suicide bombers can understand as providing a solution to their personal emotional woes. Suicide bombers are thus hopeful that their actions will repair any damage to their sense of self through martyrdom, revenge, and admission to Paradise. Mass suicidal behavior, whether at Jonestown, Masada, conducted by the Kamikazes, or perpetrated by Hamas, requires an ideological framework, and it requires some sort of preparation or 'practice.'

J. Reid Meloy, et al, (2001) [9] writing after September 11th, 2001, attempts to analyze Homicidal and Suicidal States of Mind (HASSOM). He states, "There is a tactical understanding of suicide as a weapon of terrorism." (Meloy, 2001) Additionally, he quotes the work of Elud Sprinzak, Dean of the

Lauder School in Israel, on the benefits of suicide terrorism: "1) no escape routes or rescue operations are required (no post-operational planning); 2) no risk of captured perpetrators divulging valuable information to the enemy; and 3) extraordinary helplessness in induced in the civilian population." Meloy adds that the typical civilian responses are: anger, fear, shock, and survivor's guilt, which includes becoming less mobile, the avoidance of large gatherings, and reduced economic activity which, in turn, may foster an economic recession. To this may be added the typical dissonance confronted by conventional military personnel, who often find the commitment or 'fanaticism' of suicidal enemies especially intimidating.

Meloy, et al, discuss in some detail the emotions of envy, helpless dependency and omnipotence. The

issue of omnipotence is best typified by the terrorist who becomes all powerful at a moment in time because the people around him have no choice but to die with him. Meloy gives an example of effective training: "The omnipotence of the moment also overcomes any fear, especially if religious beliefs promise martyrdom laced with sexual bliss.", as is the case with some Islamist ideologies.

Building upon the work of Eric Hoffer ,[10] Meloy has taken the construct of the Violent True Believer and developed the picture of an individual who is committed to an ideology or radical belief system which advances homicide and suicide as legitimate means to further a particular operational goal.[11] This definition is an excellent explanation of the fact that the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka are the leaders in suicide terrorism, but follow a Marxist-Leninist ideology.[12] Thus the individual psychology of Islamic fundamentalist warriors and Marxist warriors does not suffer from incongruity of belief systems, but rather gives way to strategic operations that have achieved success across cultures. Due to international media coverage these suicidal acts have then become a significant part of a successful information campaign against more sophisticated and larger government establishments.

This article has attempted a "quick look" at the suicide-bomber and his/her motivations and orientations. The authors have included the basics of a relationship between the suicide bomber and insurgent/terrorist information operations. Excluded from this presentation, but available in the expanded version, is an actual psychological perspective of a suicide-bomber, domestic concerns, female suicide bombers, and the role of group perceptions in collective suicide activity.

Notes

[1] Durkheim, Emil. Le Suicide: Etude de sociologie. Paris: F. Alcan, 1897.

[2] Sullivan, Harry S. Conceptions of Modern Psychiatry: Collected Works of Harry Stack Sullivan, Vol. 1. New York: Norton, 1953.

[3] Shneidman, Edward S. Definition of Suicide. New York: Wiley, 1985.

[4] Murray, Henry. Explorations in Personality. New York: Oxford University Press, 1938.

[5] Cartwright, General James E. Statement before the Strategic Forces Subcommittee on Space Policy, 16 March 2005, pg. 2.

[6] Joiner, Thomas. Why People Die by Suicide. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005.

[7] Atran, Scott. "Mishandling Suicide Terrorism." The Washington Quarterly, 27, (2004) 67-90.

[8] Atran, Scott. "Genesis of Suicide Terrorism." Science, 2999 (2003) 1534-1539.

[9] Meloy, J. Reid. "Indirect Personality Assessment of the Violent True Believer." Master Lecture. Society for Personality Assessment. March 21, 2003, pg. 2

[10] Hoffer, Eric. The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements. New York, Harper & Row, 1951.

[11] Pape, Robert A. "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism." American Political Science Review, Vol. 97, No.3, August 2003, pg. 1.

[12] Meloy, Opcit.

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